

## MARCH OF THE CYBORGS: THE 59TH VENICE BIENNALE

By Rachel Wetzler / August 9, 2022 6:08pm



Lead crystal sculptures by Andra Ursuta (foreground) and wool-on-canvas paintings by Rosemarie Trockel (on wall).PHOTO MARCO CAPPELLETTI/COURTESY LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

One of the most memorable displays in the 59th Venice Biennale exhibition, “The Milk of Dreams,” curated by Italian New Yorker Cecilia Alemani and titled after a 1950s children’s book by Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington, appears near the entrance of the Central Pavilion in the Giardini, just past Katharina Fritsch’s 1987 replica of a taxidermic elephant, which opens the show with a sort of apparition. Sitting atop pedestals are nine of Andra Ursuța’s sci-fi-inspired lead crystal sculptures in bright, swirling hues. Cast from body parts and consumer trash, they emulate the creaturely eponyms of films like *Alien* and *Predator*. On the surrounding gallery walls hangs an array of abstract, jewel-toned panels from Rosemarie Trockel’s ongoing series “Knitted Pictures,” begun in 1984. The artist has alternately enlisted a programmed knitting machine and a human collaborator to execute textiles that are stretched over canvas like

paintings. The imposingly large *Till the Cows Come Home* (2016), for instance, is a square of deep-blue yarn, ironically accompanied by a smaller-scale “study” for the monochrome. This room—an early favorite on critics’ best-of lists, not to mention a hit on Instagram during the opening—is emblematic of Alemani’s curatorial approach throughout the exhibition, characterized by visually stunning, often unexpected pairings of sculpture in the round with paintings or wall-bound works, deftly installed to meet the formidable spatial challenges posed by the Biennale’s main venues. And yet: what does placing Ursuța and Trockel side by side tell us about either body of work? Mostly that the two artists employ complementary palettes.

I’ll admit that it feels a bit churlish, after two-plus years of remote viewing, to complain that an exhibition merely looks great. Alemani’s juxtapositions do, after all, tend to flatter the works. Elsewhere in the Central Pavilion, a set of new sculptures by Hannah Levy featuring silicone skins stretched over uncanny metal armatures anchors an arrangement of effaced and distorted figures dissolving into abstraction: Christina Quarles’s raucous paintings of warped bodies and Kaari Upson’s *Portrait (Vain German)*, 2020–21, completed shortly before her death from cancer, a series of lurid, illegible resin and urethane casts of the surfaces of self-portraits she painted in thick impasto. Recent canvases by Jacqueline Humphries that travesty the expressive hand of gestural abstraction in allover compositions, featuring layered patterns of screen static and emoticons, are set against four sculptures from Sara Enrico’s ongoing series “The Jumpsuit Theme” (2017–), comprising pigmented concrete casts of workwear. Reclining on a shared low pedestal, the sculptures suggest both contorted limbs and looping script—and also, curiously, Humphries’s paintings, given their shared pastel palettes, white grounds, and evocations of bodily calligraphy.

Especially strong is the pairing, greeting visitors to the Arsenale, of Simone Leigh’s monumental bronze *Brick House* (2019) with a suite of black-and-white collagraph prints by the late Cuban artist Belkis Ayón. An eyeless bust of a Black woman whose torso takes the form of a domed hut, alluding to vernacular building traditions from West Africa and the American South, Leigh’s hybrid of body and architecture finds a haunting inversion in Ayón’s repeated renderings of the mythic figure *Sikán*, the lone woman featured in the lore of the secretive Afro-Cuban religious fraternity *Abakuá*. Here the princess, said to have been sacrificed for possessing or betraying a secret, is depicted as a dark silhouette whose sole facial feature is a pair of bright white eyes. While the pandemic put Alemani in the unenviable position of curating the world’s most prestigious exhibition via Zoom, it also afforded her an extra year to plan, enabling impressive logistical coups like a mini survey of Portuguese painter Paula Rego. Many of the selected artists hail from outside the expected art-world centers, and, for the first time in the Biennale’s 127-year history, a small minority of them—21 out of 213—are male. (This is certainly a welcome demographic shift, though I could live without the celebratory invocation of “sisterhood” in the exhibition text.)

BUT HOWEVER MUCH THE SHOW succeeds as a formal exercise, it is remarkably insubstantial as an exploration of ideas, despite the elaborate theoretical and historical framework Alemani has marshaled around her selections. As she explains in the catalogue, the exhibition takes its cues from the mad dreamscape of Carrington’s stories, “a world free of

hierarchies, where everyone can become something else, where humans, animals, and machines coexist in a symbiotic relationship that is sometimes joyous, sometimes disgusting.” From this, Alemani extrapolated three main themes—“the representation of bodies and their metamorphoses; the relationship between individuals and technologies; [and] the connection between bodies and the Earth”—linking Carrington’s Surrealist fairy tales, originally composed on the walls of her son’s childhood bedroom, to other, denser touchstones, namely Rosi Braidotti’s Deleuzian posthumanist texts, Donna Haraway’s by now iconic “Cyborg Manifesto” (1985), and Silvia Federici’s notion of “re-enchanting the world,” all of which are cited repeatedly in the catalogue and wall labels.

What this means in practice is a kind of phantasmagoria of the Surreal-ish, the animalesque, and the machinelike, yoking together works in a manner that too often careens between the flimsily pretextual and the didactic and overdetermined. Walking through the galleries, we face an endless parade of mutant, mutating creatures: Inuk artist Shuvinai Ashoona’s drawings depict encounters between half-human platypuses and walruses chatting in tunics and mittens in the Arctic, while the late Vienna Actionist Birgit Jürgenssen is represented by pseudoscientific renderings of curious specimens, like an insect with the body of a Swiss Army knife, or a sharply attired man with crustacean legs and claws sprouting from one side. Zhenya Machneva depicts anthropomorphized relics of Soviet industry in handwoven tapestries such as *Echo* (2021), which recasts the gaskets of an old furnace into a face’s gaping maw. Both Marguerite Humeau and Teresa Solar construct slick sculptural fusions of prehistoric fossils and aerodynamic vessels.

Extending the show’s theoretical matrix are five “time capsules” nested within the larger exhibition. These thematic mini-exhibitions of historical women artists are arranged in distinct galleries (designed by the Italian studio FormaFantasma, with colored walls, moody lighting, and plush carpet), and are meant to tease out alternate art-historical genealogies for the Biennale’s contemporary works. In the rambling Central Pavilion at the Giardini, the largest and most central of these mini-surveys, “The Witch’s Cradle,” which Alemani describes as the show’s “fulcrum,” gathers works by women aligned with Surrealism and related interwar movements who play with self-fashioning and the mutability of identity. Alongside the expected names—Carrington, Remedios Varo, Leonor Fini, Dorothea Tanning, Claude Cahun—are more surprising ones, including the Harlem Renaissance sculptor Augusta Savage and Josephine Baker, represented by a film recording of a 1925 performance at the Paris music hall Folies Bergère in which she dances a bare-breasted Charleston. “Corps Orbite” focuses on language and feminine embodiment, proposing a provocative, if dubious, alignment between the drawings and writings channeled by late 19th and early 20th century spiritualists, postwar concrete poetry, and Luce Irigaray’s conception of *l’écriture féminine*. “Technologies of Enchantment,” meanwhile, highlights women Op artists and kinetic sculptors who were marginalized within Italy’s 1960s *Arte Programmata* movement.

At the Arsenale, where the exhibition space dictates a linear path, two further “time capsules” are more directly situated as precursors to the newer works around them. “A Leaf a Gourd a Shell a Net a Bag a Sling a Sack a Bottle a Pot a Box a Container,” occupying a suggestively

uterine chamber with curving walls and pink floors, features an array of vessel-like sculptures and objects that range from Ruth Asawa's undulating wire constructions and Mária Bartussová's delicate plaster ovals that recall cracked eggs to 19th-century papier-mâché models of the female reproductive system belonging to the pioneering Dutch physician Aletta Jacobs. Just outside are recent examples of Thai painter Pinaree Sanpitak's spare renderings of breasts abstracted into the form of bowls, and British-Kenyan ceramicist Magdalene Odundo's anthropomorphized clay vases.

The final subsection, "Seduction of the Cyborg," invokes Donna Haraway's conception of the cyborg—as a subversive embodiment of boundaries dissolved—to link the avant-garde fascination with prosthetic bodies to the turn-of-the-century figure of the independent, androgynous New Woman. The latter is represented in oblique self-portraits by Marianne Brandt and Florence Henri, and grotesque collages by Hannah Höch. Bafflingly overseen by larger-than-life archival glamour shots of the Dada Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Futurist dancer Giannina Censi, these historical predecessors give way to any number of bizarre contemporary interpenetrations of body and machine throughout the Arsenale: Dora Budor's "Autophones" (2022), quasi-industrial constructions in wood that cross musical instruments with sex toys; Mire Lee's *Endless House: Holes and Drips* (2022), a gory motorized installation of tangled PVC tubes oozing liquid clay; and Tishan Hsu's synthetic prints patterned with orifices and screens.

ULTIMATELY, THOUGH, ALEMANI'S approach is less transhistorical than pseudomorphic, flattening all the works on view into one strange, hybrid form after another. Consider, for instance, Alemani's impressively humorless catalogue description of Raphaela Vogel's riotous installation *Können und Müssen* (Ability and Necessity, 2022), an oversize anatomical model of a disease-riddled penis carted along on a wheeled plinth by a procession of skeletal giraffes: "A world where animals have won out over humans." Elsewhere, the consequences of that flattening are more pernicious, stripping away any sense of cultural or contextual specificity: numerous works on view show bodies communing and commingling with the landscape, ranging from Afro-Brazilian artist Rosana Paulino's commanding watercolors that depict standing or squatting nude females with knotted roots and vines sprouting from their genitals and extremities to Zheng Bo's "eco-sexual" video *Le Sacre du Printemps* (Tandvärkstallen), 2021, imagining erotic encounters between queer men and forest flora, not to mention Delcy Morelos's room-size installation *Earthly Paradise* (2022), which envelops the viewer in a muddy sensorium of scented earth. But Paulino's drawings—particularly the "Wet Nurse" series (2005), several examples of which are included here—reflect on the legacy of slavery and colonialism in Brazil and the ways in which value has been forcibly extracted from both Black women's bodies and the land, while Bo's video proposes a radical vision of harmonic interspecies coexistence.

Lingering over Alemani's presentations, then, is an uncomfortable sense that the works on view exist in a state of generic timelessness. Indeed, the Arsenale even ends with a vision of a return to the garden: Precious Okoyomon's *To See the Earth before the End of the World* (2022), a massive gallery transformed into a landscape of flora, butterflies, and gurgling streams, with hulking, earthen figures rising up from the ground, all of which will be progressively overtaken by

invasive kudzu as it spreads throughout the installation, offering the hopeful possibility of destruction catalyzing a new beginning. This is, I suppose, the nature of dreams; and given how dismal the world looks beyond Venice, who wouldn't want to dwell here for a while? But eventually, we all have to wake up.